

Walanga Muru Reflection - COVID-19 and a Community Approach to Indigenous Higher Education Success at Macquarie University

Tamika Worrell and Leanne Holt

Abstract

On the 21 March 2020, Walanga Muru, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander space at Macquarie University, transitioned to a fully digital community as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. Walanga Muru's success is grounded by our ability to form relationships and connections, guided by Aboriginal values, perspectives, shared experiences, and aspirations. These connections allow us to share journeys with our community members contributing to overcoming challenges, highlighting opportunities, and together celebrating success. The successful transition to a digital community where students and staff felt engaged and connected, academically, culturally, socially and emotionally was paramount. Quickly we adopted the catch phrase, 'still strong, still deadly but online' and commenced on a journey that will change the way we do things forever more. Through reflections from staff of Walanga Muru, this paper tells the story of how we responded to developing this digital community in this challenging time.

Walanga Muru Reflection - COVID-19 and a Community Approach to Indigenous Higher Education Success at Macquarie University

Introduction

In March 2020 the world was confronted with a crisis, as we started hearing for the first time the words COVID-19. Borders were fast being closed and cities went into lockdown. Universities were forced to immediately reconsider their traditional physical places of learning and instead transition to a fully digital space that would result in the least amount of disruption for students. Reconsidering the conversion of relationships from a physical space to an online space was integral to how we moved forward (Jamieson, et al., 2000). In implementing this transition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Walanga Muru implemented a three-phased approach that would continue to meet the academic, financial, cultural and social-emotional wellbeing of students. The fast-acting nature of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on our student spaces, but it also spurred significant innovations that will positively impact our community for years to come.

While the online space isn't by any means a new concept the forced and immediate nature of the transition immediately highlighted some challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including access to appropriate technology. Hunter and Radoll (2020) highlights a continued divide between Australian Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people in relation to the access and adoption of appropriate digital technologies and communications (Hunter and Radoll, 2020). One of the main factors identified by Hunter and Radoll (2020) was the cost impact associated with accessing internet and digital technologies, as well as the prioritisation of their resources and income to cover other essential items. In the

midst of a pandemic where digital technology fast became the platform for delivering higher education, it was crucial that this was considered to ensure current and future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education students were not excluded from successfully engaging in university study. Although the past decade has seen significant increases in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education student outcomes, they continue to be below the academic indicators for non-Indigenous students across access, participation and success (Universities Australia, 2019). Walanga Muru determined that a holistic approach was necessary to ensure students continued to be engaged in their studies and were not disadvantaged due to isolation, lack of access to appropriate technology and other services required to continue a successful student experience

As identified in the Behrendt Review, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student spaces provide a range of social, cultural, social, and financial support, including culturally safe spaces (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012). Walanga Muru positions itself as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community at Macquarie University with a foundational philosophy that we provide a culturally affirming and intellectually engaging community space, that draws on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, perspectives, experiences and aspirations. Our community space is made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, staff, and friends of Walanga Muru. This paper will provide a reflection on how we responded and continued to align our relationships with our philosophy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, in establishing a digital community that ensured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff continued to feel connected with a strong sense of community. Secondly, how we utilised online processes and structures that would ensure the financial and academic stability of students, as well as the adaption of our pathways program to allow the continued connection with our partner high schools. Finally, how we maintained cultural and social-

emotional engagement in a time that had the potential to be very isolating for our Walanga Muru community. These reflections will include both the challenges and the successes that will not just serve a purpose for the current environment but will define for us a new future in Indigenous higher education.

Three phased approach

A strong plan was developed to ensure our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, inclusive of students and staff, had every opportunity to succeed in the current environment, and that health measures were considered to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our community (Toquero, 2020). The plan incorporated a three phased approach that responded to the new challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The phases integrated sharing of information, responding to challenges, maintaining relationships and celebrating success. Although we present them as three phases the timing of implementation was over a short timeframe, with crossover between the phases.

Phase 1 – Continuity of Community

Phase 2 – Academic and Financial stability

Phase 3 – Cultural and Social-emotional engagement

Phase 1 – Continuity of Community

In conjunction with the national closure of physical university spaces, Macquarie University moved forward their two-week mid-semester break to allow for the conversion to online learning. This timeframe allowed us to adopt our first phase that considered the importance of communal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander spaces on campus' that are culturally

affirming, contributing to the participation and success of Indigenous students (Perry and Holt, 2018). This phase prioritised the building of an online community where students and staff could maintain strong relationships and feel connected. The promotional catch phrase promoted to our Walanga Muru community, ‘Still strong, Still Deadly but online’, was our first step in reassuring the concerns of students and building our capacity in a new digital community space.



Image 1: Promotional catch phrase for our digital community and online engagement

The success of transitioning to an online community also relied on the continued connection and contribution of staff who had also now moved to working from home. It was identified that the use of Zoom was the most effective digital platform for engagement, as it was easily accessed, real time, documents and files able to be shared, sessions able to be recorded and meetings could be secured if required (Nash, 2020). It was also the best platform as the University had opted for Zoom to be the preferred teaching platform. We arranged three staff Zoom meetings per week. Our regular Monday morning social and cultural staff gatherings were converted to Zoom, acknowledging the countries we are working on, reflecting on our responsibilities to our ancestors and allowing staff to continue to share their weekend activities, as well as what they were looking forward to that week. Our mid-week meeting reported back what each staff member was working on and provided updates on any university actions related

to the COVID-19 Plan, as well as any new ideas in relation to ensuring high-level engagement with students. Friday afternoon included a quick update on activities and then a social gathering with trivia and other activities.

Social media became an integral platform for sharing ideas, information, formal and informal communications. Carlson (2017) describes the importance that our community places on the positive aspects of social media as a way to connect and to share and celebrate our identity and culture, as well as discuss shared challenges. Our initial campaign worked to ensure all students were connected through our private internal Facebook group, as we found that was the most accessible format to regularly engage with our student community, and to create a forum of open communication. We kept a data list of the small number of students without Facebook accounts however wanting to be involved, and these students were sent any relevant Facebook communications via email. We established two weekly Zooms for student and community engagement. The first, was a community lunch drop in where each week a different student received a home delivered lunch. Staff and students would join and yarn generally over their lunches like we would normally do on campus, ensuring the students continued to feel supported and connected. Our second was a drop-in time for students to engage much like they would in a physical office space. We had themed yarns around important university dates, as well as general engagement activities such as games and trivia.

Given there was no roadmap on how our community should respond to the pandemic that had forced us into isolated environments, peer sharing of practices and experiences was clearly valued by students. To initiate this sharing, we launched a ‘Show us your study space’ promotion, where students would create a video showing their current study space and routine

on our Facebook group. This campaign aimed to show that students all had a different method for studying and not all students had a dedicated study space. It also shared familiar faces from our community and expanded networking opportunities. Students that shared their study spaces and routines were given a \$30 gift card in exchange for their time. This was the first of many peer engagement opportunities.

National Reconciliation Week¹ in 2020 was 27 May to the 3 June, with all pre-planned physical events and activities cancelled. However, this provided us with our first opportunity to celebrate, with a fitting theme, ‘In this Together’, reflecting that in the current environment as a nation, as well as globally, we were all impacted to varying degrees (Reconciliation Australia, 2020). We celebrated with a reconciliation week bake off, based around the theme of National Reconciliation Week. Students registered to participate and were sent a \$20 grocery gift card to get the supplies to make their cake. The participants all posted their creations on a designated thread and there were three prizes: most votes, people’s choice (panel decision) and a lucky draw prize (random selection). In addition, we created a collaborative video with Indigenous staff, non-Indigenous staff and our student community. This video had participants introduce themselves and give an acknowledgement of the Aboriginal land in which they were filming on. The reconciliation video was launched across wider university social media channels at the end of National Reconciliation Week.

¹ <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/national-reconciliation-week/>



Image 2: Snapshot of some of the submissions to the Reconciliation Week Bake Off

These early strategies firmly grounded our online community presence, with the addition of students that had not previously engaged with our physical space, for a number of reasons. It became evident that the digital community provided more accessibility for students, particularly postgraduate students that primarily study off-campus or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff working in diverse areas across the university. Furthermore, students that had not previously engaged with Walanga Muru felt more comfortable to engage in an online community as they believed it was a less intimidating environment. This was particularly the case for students that were newly exploring their identity based on intergenerational disconnection from community, family, culture and experiences as a result of historical repressive policies and practices (Carlson, 2016). Once they realised that the Walanga Muru community welcomed and respected diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences, they engaged as valued members of our community. Therefore, it was clear that the online community had wider advantages than solely responding to a pandemic environment, rather increased accessibility, and inclusion for more of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and staff community.

Academic and Financial Stability

Our second phase involved addressing the challenge of technology access to ensure students were academically and financially stable in this new online environment. In a regular semester, students have access to a range of computers, internet, and unlimited printing at Walanga Muru. Accessibility to computers, internet, and appropriate software continues to challenge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational success (Radoll, 2012). The pandemic highlighted that many of our students did not have access to home computers and/or internet. Frequently, students commented that they only had one computer in a household that needed to be shared with siblings now undertaking schooling from home. An Indigenous Student COVID-19 grant scheme for students was implemented, allowing for grants up to \$2000 in order to provide necessary equipment such as desks, laptops, mobile internet and internet usage costs. This grant coincided with the University COVID-19 grant scheme, however providing quicker access to emergency funds for bills and groceries. We paired the Walanga Muru COVID-19 grant with a calling campaign to all students, to check in on their adjustment to online learning, their general wellbeing, and the necessary access to technology at home. Students that indicated they were having difficulties with technology, their home study spaces, and internet were referred to the COVID-19 grant application. The application boasted a quick turnaround, with a maximum of two-weeks from application to outcome and payment.

The changing climate of the university saw an extension to the census date, to allow for students to finalise their enrolment later than usual and accounting for the change in delivery. In collaboration with the scholarships team, students were granted early access to their relevant scholarships, to ease financial concerns. This meant students did not have to wait additional weeks due to scholarship payments being tied to the census date.

In order to ensure academic stability, our tutoring program was quickly transitioned to an online only offering. Tutoring provides an opportunity for students to access vital academic study skills assistance, aiming to close the educational disadvantage still experienced by Indigenous students (Behrendt et al. 2012). An increase in student engagement with our tutoring during this time-period provided an indication that students valued having access to one on one tutors to supplement what would normally be in class learning. Over 100 additional sessions of tutoring were allocated in Semester One, 2020 compared to Session One, 2019. Session Two also saw a significant increase in the number of students accessing tutoring, with 170 students matched with a tutor compared to only 116 students in Session Two 2019. Alongside tutoring, students reached out to staff more frequently to find resolutions for extensions and attendance, with increased support needed to submit special consideration requests for assessments due to COVID-19 related challenges, including Sorry Business² which had an increased impact to cultural and personal wellbeing with the restrictions to funeral attendance.

Waranara Academic Mentoring Program offered another layer of engagement for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that had achieved a Weighted Average Mark (WAM) of 70 or over. Students are linked with an academic mentor within their department to provide ongoing guidance in relation to their academic journey, research engagement and post university guidance. In 2020, this was delivered fully online with over 100 more sessions undertaken in Session One 2020 when compared with Session One 2019.

² Sorry Business relates to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples attending ceremonies and responsibilities for a period of time after a family or community member returns to the spirit world.

Results after the first semester 2020 demonstrated that there was an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receiving higher grades (credits and above) and less students deemed at academic risk compared to 2019. It is assumed that this was a result of students having more flexibility in the timeframes to engage with tutors, the Walanga Muru community and other academic services, as well as increased peer support and overall resilience to cope with challenging situations.

Cultural and Socio-Emotional Engagement

The third phase encompassed consistent and ongoing cultural and socio-emotional engagement. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including young people, have been considered vulnerable during COVID-19 due to the limited access to community, cultural events, as well as access to extended family (Jones et al., 2020). This is heightened through existing factors, including poorer health outcomes and mental health distress during this pandemic (Jones et al., 2020). Therefore, our cultural engagement needed to supplement the cultural activities and pastoral care we would normally have provided physically on campus, including access to cultural mentorship from staff, social activities, and cultural workshops. This was achieved through a number of engagement activities, ensuring students had options for cultural engagement at a time where isolation from community was at an all-time high.

Our initial engagement involved the consideration of students spending less time on Country due to restrictions to stay home unless essential travel therefore spending increased amounts of time inside. We reflected on how we could bring Country to students. We decided upon small desk plants, to have students feel connected to nature whilst also contributing to student study

spaces. By posting these out, students were excited to receive their packages and posted growth updates of their plants throughout the semester on Facebook.

Our next step was to establish a yarning Zoom so students could connect with our Cultural Advisor and Cultural Training coordinator, in a cultural mentorship capacity. This mimicked the ‘drop in and have a cuppa’ mantra that was often used in physical spaces. This took place periodically throughout the semester, and students were provided contact details for engagement and connection outside these Zooms.

Our cultural engagement continued with a four week online weaving course, led by Ngumpie Weaving³. Weaving packages were sent each week and were accompanied by an hour how-to Zoom and yarn on Friday afternoons for four weeks in a row. This allowed our student and staff community to engage in a cultural practice, while having important wellbeing discussions and sharing their university progress. The weaving sessions led to students and staff having four finished pieces, with one piece being reserved to come together in a collaborative piece which will be hung at Walanga Muru.

Peer engagement has also been an important part of our Walanga Muru community connections. Students led painting workshops, daily exercise routines, and ‘up late’ student yarn ups. Many of these student-led activities were driven by students that had remained in the on campus residential accommodation and provided them with an important connection to peers that had returned to their home communities. The student-led activities consistently had

³ <https://www.facebook.com/ngumpieweaving/>

high-level participation from student peers and provided a platform for informal discussion and collaboration.

In addition, we also hosted a private screening of the film *'In my Blood it Runs'* with 50 students, staff and community members attending. This screening involved a pre-film yarn over Zoom, and a post-film debrief yarn. Participants were sent a movie pack including popcorn, a hot drink and other movie snacks. The debrief yarn allowed wellbeing services to be shared, as well as allowing the primary themes of the film to be explored.

We recently held a virtual graduation celebration for the 56 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that were due to graduate in 2020⁴. One of the unfortunate outcomes of COVID-19 to higher education was the cancellation of physical graduations. A graduation is a significant milestone that gives us pause to reflect on student's perseverance and dedication, and to thank them for the contributions that they make to our university and Walanga Muru community. The virtual graduation celebration was live streamed on YouTube, providing the opportunity for graduates, many first in family, to share this celebration with friends and families across Australia, some of which hadn't been able to physically connect since March. Feedback from the event commended the accessibility, including cross-border access during COVID restrictions.

⁴ View the Walanga Muru virtual graduation here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyvLyYDaibg>

What did the students think?

During this period, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students expressed high satisfaction with the level of engagement and experiences led by Walanga Muru. Students indicated that they felt more informed and supported by Walanga Muru than the wider university, and that they were able to be more connected than ever before. The majority of feedback indicated students felt that the personal and broader group community engagement was excellent during this period academically, culturally, socially and emotionally. Mature age students and postgraduate students commented on the increased level of engagement and accessibility to the Walanga Muru community compared to previous years. Students also valued the ongoing connection with their peers and the opportunity to meet new members of the Walanga Muru community.

Conclusion

2020 has challenged us to think of new ways to do things in a year that will be recorded in history. As First Nations people our contemporary histories have challenged us with continued adversity, yet the resilience of our people has made us stronger (Power, et al., 2020). Now, more than ever, having Indigenous-led solutions that unite us as a community and ensure our ongoing success in higher education is vital. A community is made stronger by the sharing and bringing together of individual dreams, experiences, knowledges and perspectives. The three phases adopted by Walanga Muru as a response to COVID-19 bring these aspects of community together to contribute to the holistic academic, emotional and cultural wellbeing of our staff and student community. As demonstrated by our increased engagement, academic outcomes, and qualitative feedback our three-phased approach is overwhelmingly positive and will guide our practice post COVID-19.

References

- Behrendt, L., Larkin, S., Griew, R., & Kelly, P. (2012). Review of higher education access and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People – Final Report. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- Carlson, B. (2017). Bronwyn Carlson: Why are Indigenous people such avid users of social media? *IndigenousX*. Accessed on September 25, 2020 at <https://indigenousx.com.au/why-are-indigenous-people-such-avid-users-of-social-media/>
- Hunter, B. ,H. & Radoll, P. J. (2020). Dynamics of Digital Diffusion and Disadoption. *AJIS. Australasian Journal of Information Systems*. Vol.24. <https://doi.org/10.3127/ajis.v24i0.1805>.
- Jamieson, P., Fisher, K., Gilding, T., Taylor, P. G., and Trevitt, A. C. F. (2000) Place and Space in the Design of New Learning Environments, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 19:2, 221-236, <https://doi.org/10.1080/072943600445664>.
- Jones, Woolfenden, Pengilly, Breen, Cohn, Biviano, Johns, Worth, Lamb, Lingam, Silove, Marks, Tzioumi, Zwi, & Jones, B. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic: The impact on vulnerable children and young people in Australia. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpc.15169>.
- Nash, C. (2020). Report on Digital Literacy in Academic Meetings during the 2020 COVID-19 Lockdown. *Challenges*, 11(2), 20.
- Perry, L., & Holt, L. (2018). Searching for the Songlines of Aboriginal education and culture within Australian higher education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 45(3), 343-361.

Power, T., Wilson, D., Best, O., Brockie, T., Bearskin, L.B., Millender, E., & Lowe, J.

(2020). COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples: An imperative for action, *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 29(15-16), pp. 2737 – 2741, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.15320>.

Radoll, P. (2015). Information and communication technologies in the classroom:

Implications and considerations. In K. Price (Author), *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education: An Introduction for the Teaching Profession*, pp. 121-139.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316134481.008>.

Reconciliation Australia (2020). *National Reconciliation Week 2020: In this together, online, and ongoing*. Accessed on September 20, 2020 at

[https://www.reconciliation.org.au/national-reconciliation-week-2020-in-this-together-online-and-](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/national-reconciliation-week-2020-in-this-together-online-and-ongoing/#:~:text=National%20Reconciliation%20Week%20(NRW)%202020,Chief%20Executive%20Officer%2C%20Karen%20Mundine)

[ongoing/#:~:text=National%20Reconciliation%20Week%20\(NRW\)%202020,Chief%20Executive%20Officer%2C%20Karen%20Mundine](https://www.reconciliation.org.au/national-reconciliation-week-2020-in-this-together-online-and-ongoing/#:~:text=National%20Reconciliation%20Week%20(NRW)%202020,Chief%20Executive%20Officer%2C%20Karen%20Mundine).

Toquero, C. M. (2020). Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education amid the

COVID-19 Pandemic: The Philippine Context. *Pedagogical Research*, 5(4), em0063.

<https://doi.org/10.29333/pr/7947>.